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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an informal account of two studies concerned with the significant positive effect which students reading to a parent or other adult has on the students' reading performance. The paper describes the first study, conducted between 1975/76 and 1978/79 in London, in which over 2000 multiracial, working class children took books home and read aloud to an adult. Results indicated a significant gain in reading performance and sustained parental interest in the program. The paper also reports on a replication (with slight alteration) of the study involving 90 students in an elementary school in British Columbia. Results indicated that the experimental group recorded a greater gain in total reading achievement than the control group. The paper emphasizes that parental support for the program was also evident. (RS)

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PARENTS AS ACTIVE MEMBERS IN THE SCHOOL'S READING PROGRAM

The Third Rupertsland Regional Conference
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There have not been, in the long history of teaching children to read, those startling serendipitous findings that we can remember happening in other disciplines .... no Alexander Flemmings looking at petrie dishes left out over a hot weekend and seeing how the green mold was affecting the bacteria on the dish; no Alissandro Volta accidently touching a frog's leg with a battery terminal, ... things like that. But one thing that has happened in the last few years that, to my mind, is a very close parallel was that accidental finding of a group of researchers in the United Kingdom led by Jennie Hewison and Jack Tizzard (1980) who were looking at the relationship that might exist between a child's background and his or her academic achievement. They were looking then at styles of parental upbringing. One thing that they did find - and here was the essential serendipitous finding - was that those who did well at reading tended to come from those families **that had their children, on a regular basis, read to them, as parents**. They simply heard their children read at home. This finding could not be accounted for in terms of differences in I.Q., maternal language behaviour, or any of the differences in upbringing style which were being investigated. The study left a number of questions unanswered.

It was interesting but sloppy data - Lots of questions were unanswered. Parents who listened to their children were a self-selected group and it might have been that the improvement was mainly due to the interest which they as parents took in their children's schooling, of which help at home was only <u>one</u> powerful indicator. .... rather than the actual help itself. Any rate it raised all manner of questions that needed to be sorted out in a more controlled way. Just so that we could be certain that it wasn't simply a case of the best readers being allowed to take their readers home .... or even wanting to.

Perhaps even more important, survey findings obtained from self-selected groups throw no light on the question of how far parental attitudes and practices are subject to change. Can one persuade all, or nearly all, parents to help their children at home ... in this case by hearing them read. Is it feasible for teachers to ensure that all children take their books home? will they come back? What are the costs?

What of the occasional snipe, "It's the teacher's job, not mine!" What of ESL children, what of families that are close to being illiterate. These were the sort of questions that could only be answered by experiment.

It came about: in a rather depressed inner core area of London; Haringey. Imagine or picture some of the worst slum areas of North America or Canada and you can get close to this area. Splice on the usual unemployment characteristic and you can flesh out the picture.

Now I want to spend a little time describing this study. As I said earlier it will probably be recognized in the future as one of the most profound studies done in Education.... Of that I am certain.

Jack Tizzard, W. Schofield and Jenny Hewison, all at that time at the Thomas Coram Research Unit of the University of London Education Institute asked a basic question:

> "Was there a causal relationship between parental help and reading performance."

The simple and very difficult task was to establish an arrangement whereby all children in certain experimental classes were heard to read at home. The team was very careful to look after controls within schools, between schools, within prime controls ... all the good things the research and design people suggest. The children themselves were from six "disadvantaged "working class" area schools around Haringey. The study started in 1975/76 and ran for three (3) years, there were 1867 children to start with. Each year another 400 or so were added.

The group was described as multi-racial. The occupations of the fathers of the children almost without exception were in the Registrar's General's manual as working-class!

So what did they do? They got someone at home to listen to them read. The interventions took place over a three-year period. Particular groups were studied in detail at certain times. For example a "cohort" was studied in the final year of their infant schooling (7 - 8 yr old) and then again in the 1st year of their junior year (8 - 9). But all children had the same baseline

reading tests at the beginning. The lengths the research team went to in order to not build in research bias was impressive.
So what was this intervention:
Children in the home reading program simply took material home with them and a parent (or, significant other) listened to them read three or four times a week. This was a funded study so the team was able to do some pretty thorough home advice visiting, counselling as to what is good practice, making sure things were getting done etc. A little unlike the real world but hold on to that one because we can talk about things on the local scene very soon.

There were even demonstrations given for a very small minority of parents who adopted strategies that were considered counter productive. One thing that surprised the team was that by and large parents were eager for advice. It put a lie to the usual feeling that people from this socioeconomic group were not likely to be interested in their children's schooling. The reverse was very much the case.

I could go on about the nuances of the study design. I don't think it's necessary. The important thing is that 3 or 4 times a week a book was sent home by the teacher, sometimes a basal reader, sometimes supplementary material or a library book... and that material was read to an adult, usually a parent. Sometimes it was a re-reading of pages covered in school. sometimes children went roaring ahead.
A question usually gets though of here: what of the materials, how many got lost. Very few apparently. It seemed the newer and brighter the materials the more care was taken of them.

That then will give you a flavour of what went on. The results ... now the exciting part:
What came through loud and clear was that a home collaboration program clearly made a difference in the reading performance of these children. Even the schools that gave LAC help didn't produce anything exciting. One school with this type of help made the children regress - (though not significantly).
The study showed that these differences were evident at the beginning, the middle and the end to the degree that:

1. Early reading performance was an extremely powerful predictor of subsequent attainment.
2. The effects of parent help could be observed right from the start.
3. The effects of extra teacher help in this instant showed no over-all increase. One school showed a decrease with this intervention.

As well the overall effect was to decrease the proportion of ch. falling below the 99 point on a standardized test. Remember that to do this in an area such as Haringey was singularly impressive.

What happened after Tizard and Hewison. Interesting - for once a piece of research had an effect. I first heard it mentioned, not in a journal, but through the services of clipping agency (my mother-in-law) who had seen it in the prestigious Sunday Times as an article by Peter Wilby, an educational reporter of repute. That article spoke of the Belfield Experiment in Rochdale in Lancashire. Rochdale had given the world the Co-op Movement and Gracie Fields but since the collapse of the cotton industry in England over 40% of the even work force was unemployed and had been for some time. A community school in Belfield was using the ideas of Tizard and Hewison. Other schools in ILEA (Inner London Educational Authority), with the help of an organization (PACT), were operating programs similar to that described by Tizard and Hewison. Almost all were in areas one could well call economically deprived. Clearly I had to go to see these programs in an implemented stage.

Going to see the Belfield Community school and PACT in Haringay was very useful. At times I think the various staffs were a little embarrassed at the simplicity of the approach. I was shown young children (Grade 2/3 equivalents to N. American) simply come to the teacher, read to her (sometimes a previously read piece, or a piece completely new depending on the child), a few supportative, or complementary words were said and some comments put down on the simplest of record keeping cards, some directions for the child to tell Mum that night and that was that. All this was done amid an active and very busy English primary classroom with a thousand and one things going on.

I was resolved to try this type of programming myself. Would it work in the

Canadian scene? Some things haven't. Sylvia Ashton Warner had some sad reservations back in the 1970's about the effectiveness of her Language Experience approach. I got Ray Giffin, an elementary school principal in the Prince George School District of B.C., interested in using the study as a thesis topic. There were several things we wanted to do to make what we saw as improvements to the design of the Tizard study. We made selections to experimental and control groups from a rank ordered list within each classroom in an attempt to eliminate a teacher bias. The control group did some math coaching with their mothers or "significant other" and the math was simply eliminated from the study and classroom reading without any home influence was measured. In this way the teacher variable which might have been a source of interference was controlled. As well, we extended the age range into the intermediate grades using grade 2-7 children (N = 90). Grade One children were not used because the Grade One teachers felt the initial part of the school's program was hectic enough without another new program and the school being run in a collegiate way this was honoured. The program ran for some 4 1/2 months (Sept.-Feb.) Intelligence was controlled for.

The results fell right into the pattern of those earlier studies in the UK:

- the experimental group recorded a greater gain in total reading achievement as measured by Gates-MacGinitie T-scores than did the control group.

- there was a significant difference in post-test Gates-MacGinitie reading scores for the experimental and control groups which did not exist in the pre-test scores.

- the significant difference n post-testing reading scores - for the experimental and control group cannot be attributed to I.Q. differences between the groups.

So once more the procedure had produced results, in rather different circumstances. There were some other spill-over as well. Parents, who had been cossetted quite well, showed a lot of interest in the program. They saw the benefit and the progression of their child's reading. Ray Giffin maintains that PTA/Home-School Nights were never so well attended as when the program was running. Teachers attested to the benefits of the parental/"significant other" intervention but did see the program as being burdensome and high in demand upon the teacher. A high degree of staff commitment and leadership drive would be

necessary to sustain the level of student, parent and staff involvement that this project called for it a full year's program had been implemented. But where else can one control for intelligence and get such results. The teacher support would be a small price to pay to produce that end.

Where do we head now with this idea. Well, we want to extend the time limit of the study perhaps to get results from a year's effort. Particular weightings to the effects of home reading programs at different grade levels could be made. A study involving a larger number of class groups at primary and intermediate grade levels would enable comparative analyses to be made to determine if gains are more likely to occur at certain grade levels. This present study suggests further study might be made if the relationship between reading ability and the students' self concept, ego strength and social-emotional comfort. Are these factors predictors of reading ability and is it only parents who can substantially influence them. No attempt was made in the present study to compare the gains in reading ability which were made by students in experimental and control groups who have been receiving learning assistance in the school. How would a home reading program affect such children with reading difficulties? Would they be served by spending extra time with a trained learning assistance teacher ... or more time reading to a "significant other." No attempts were made to see if there was a relationship between the size of reading gains registered in these types of programs and the amount of time that children spend reading to their parents at home. Optimum times and frequency of home practice could be more accurately determined.

The simple procedure of children reading to a parent or "significant other" has produced some startling results. With every new piece of work the case one can make for incorporating it with a reading program is strengthened.